DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 427 CS 217 038

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TITLE Making Sense of Conflict: A "Maternal" Framework for the Writing Conference.
PUB DATE 1999-04-15
NOTE 20p.; Revised version of a paper presented at the Joint Meeting of the National and East Central Writing Centers Associations (Bloomington, Indiana, April 15-17, 1999).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Interpersonal Communication; Metaphors; *Student Needs; Teacher Student Relationship; *Tutoring; *Tutors; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Laboratories
IDENTIFIERS *Tutor Role

ABSTRACT

For a variety of reasons, the writing center conference is a site where difficult interpersonal negotiations must be made. Despite the idealized notion of equality between tutors and students during a session, tutors are in charge, and as such, they must plan and run the session so that it best meets the needs of the student. Tutors must do this in an improvisational way because they confront students and their issues at the exact moment during which they must be dealt with. To give tutors more tools with which to do so, this paper explicates a "maternal" metaphor for the writing conference. The paper's metaphor attempts to provide a framework that helps tutors understand the conflicts they face in the writing conference and in their identities as tutors, thus allowing them to better serve their students. (Contains 11 references.) (NKA)

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Revised paper for National and East Central Writing Centers Association Conference, April 1999

Making Sense of Conflict:

A "Maternal" Framework for the Writing Conference

For a variety of reasons, the writing center conference is a site where difficult interpersonal negotiations must be made. Despite the idealized notion of equality between tutors and students during a session, tutors are in charge, and as such, they must plan and run the session so that it best meets the needs of the student. Tutors must do this in an improvisational way because they confront students and their issues at the exact moment during which they must be dealt with. To give tutors more tools with which to do so, this paper explicates a "maternal" metaphor for the writing conference. This metaphor attempts to provide a framework that helps tutors understand the conflicts they face in the writing conference and in their identities as tutors, thus allowing them to better serve their students.

It has often been said that one of the best ways to teach, one of the best ways to learn, is individualized instruction. In this setting, students get intense instruction, intense in the sense that the instructor's attention is focused on *one* pupil. Writing Centers grow out of this educational paradigm. In the writing conference, students bring papers or various other writing tasks (resumes, personal statements, etc.) to instructors, and for anywhere from fifteen minutes to over an hour, students and instructors work on the task at hand.

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I've tutored in writing centers for a total of about 4 years now, and I love it. I love the intensity of that particular kind of teaching, its almost intimate nature. And in my experience in writing centers, I've come to realize that the dynamics of the conference, the dynamics that surround tutor, student and product, are very, very complex. This is for several reasons: first, there is the baggage that each participant has about writing, and there is also the baggage they have about working in a close, one-on-one relationship with someone else. Second, there is the improvisational nature of the writing conferences; tutors always have to think on their feet.

As a tutor, students come to me, and, in a few short minutes, I have to assess them and their writing. I have to make decisions about how to best proceed, how to address the needs of that paper and that person. The writing conference is an intricate, complex environment. Multiple points of view, worries and goals all weave together during what is usually a pretty short time period. Conferences consist of a network of choices made by the participants. First, students (usually) choose to bring in their writing. They then must decide what questions to ask, what priorities to set, and how to respond to the tutor. Writing tutors also face a wide array of decisions.

They assess both the writing and the student. They must do their own

job of prioritizing the issues that will be discussed in the conference, and they must also decide how best to work with the writer. The number of negotiations tutors must make during a conference, the number of unknowns they face, are mind-boggling; they can be overwhelming. Though I'm aware, theoretically, of the many choices I make during a conference, I have to confess that, when I'm in the moment, these choices are most often made unconsciously or at least very, very quickly. I'm not alone in this. Tutors rarely have advanced knowledge about the client or the writing. More often than not, they must deal with these *in the moment*. In my own teaching, I've been working on a way to better contend with this very fluid, layered situation and make peace with its benefits and detractions. I've been trying to develop a framework with which I can approach this "teaching in the moment," a rubric within which to fit things in the instant I confront them, something that can help me better negotiate among the hodgepodge of expectations and goals that make up writing conferences. I want a way of conceiving of this situation that will help be better understand myself and my students, thereby better serving them. In wrestling with this, I've worked out a "maternal" framework, a metaphor for approaching and understanding writing tutoring. I believe that a maternal metaphor captures many of the nuances of the writing conference.

Though I strongly believe that "maternal" is the term that best fits this metaphor and the situation to which I want to apply it, I can't help but cringe a little because I know that "maternal" brings with it a great deal of intellectual (as well as emotional) baggage. Why maternal? Why not paternal or parental? How am I using the term? The very complexity of the denotations and connotations of maternal are precisely what make it an appropriate metaphor for writing tutor. "Maternal" is a contested word, a word that recognizes the contradictions and conflict inherent in its referent. Differing goals and expectations of the different parties in the relationship are part of maternal conflict. Different understandings of obligations and identities also have a role in maternal conflictedness as do different understandings of how to perform the role. These conflicts are analogous to the conflicts of the writing instructor. To begin, I want to discuss some connotations of "mother." I will discuss some of the research that has been done on the diversity of the "maternal." I will then explain how the diversity and conflict of the "maternal" fits with the writing conference.

Despite enlightened views on gender roles and child-rearing, mothers are still most often considered primary caregivers; they are the nurturers and have the responsibility to raise children. In terms of that charge, what is expected

of mothers? Most simply put, mothers are expected to eventually produce individuals who are self-sufficient and who are productive, relatively healthy members of society. Whether this is a fair responsibility or not, it is a mother's job to raise a child who can eventually function on her own.

Many different scholars have worked to theorize the mother and her relationships (Chodorow 1978, Roiphe 1996, Walters 1992), and though these different views of the mother don't always mesh, they do have one thing in common. Motherhood is not a simple task, and the expectations placed upon those who perform it are not always reasonable. Mothers, in fulfilling the oftentimes unreasonable role placed upon them, are frequently idolized and demonized. I want to, very briefly, touch upon some theoretical constructions of the mother, particularly in terms of their conflictedness.

In writing From Klein to Kristeva: Psychoanalytic Feminism and the Search for the "Good Enough" Mother, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges begin by examining Melanie Klein's and D.W. Winnicot's constructed mothers in conjunction with each other, and it is this examination I would like to focus on first. Each of the theorists in this text base their constructions of the mother, at least in part, on object-relations theory. Chodorow defines it this way: "Object-relations theory shares with other psychoanalytic perspectives an

emphasis on the basic importance of sexuality [i.e. its distortion/repression during early years. But,]. . . object-relations theorists argue that the child's social relational experience from earliest infancy is determining for psychological growth and personality formation" (47). Put simply, sexuality is important, but the child's relationships with others are more important in determining her development. Traditionally, infants interact most closely with their mothers. As a consequence of this theoretical approach and the assumption of mother's close relations with their children, it is mothers who are *primarily* responsible for the development of the child. In their text, Doane and Hodges work to show that these object-relations theorists each present a very intricate portrait of the mother and her influence, though some of these portraits are shaped by "a patriarchal gender ideology" (33).

Both Winnicot's and Klein's mothers are constructed by the child; however, they are *very* different constructions. Klein's mother is described as "wonderfully difficult to place" (Doane and Hodges 16). She is so difficult to place because of her multiple, layered identity. Klein sees the source of the mother construct in the infant's "depressive anxiety." (Doane and Hodges 12). "In Klein's view, the mother's 'plenitude' (her riches, which include both milk and penis) creates anxiety in the infant rather than bliss" (Doane and Hodges

11). The mother's complexity is first seen as the "plenitude" she provides the child. In the beginning, the child first sees the mother as discrete parts that affect the child (breast, hands, etc.). Eventually, this understanding of separate parts evolves into an understanding of the mother as the source of all good things. This mother is both inside and outside the child, both male and female; she contains everything, and boundaries are virtually nonexistent. According to Klein, the mother is *all* to the child; she is the source of material comforts. But, the child develops so that, as a result of the depression and guilt that surround the infant's understanding of mother as "plenitude," and as a result of understanding embodying *everything* also means embodying *bad* things, the mother is eventually seen as something that is both good and bad (Doane and Hodges 9-10). The child's construction of the mother evolves--from mother as pieces to mother as unified whole, though a complex and even contradictory whole. This mother is created by the infant; the infant's depression and anxiety over her "plenitude" are the main impulses that construct her as both "good" and "bad."

D.W. Winnicot disagrees with Klein's description of an anxious, depressed, greedy infant. For him, the infant is neither anxious nor depressed. His greediness is seen merely as a stage, a kind of "self-expression" (Doane and

Hodges 19). Winnicot's infant is a much more positive character. In his construction, it is the responsibility of the mother to help the infant develop that "greedy" self-expression into one that is more appropriate (Doane and Hodges 19). Now, the mother is no longer just a construction of the infant; here, she has agency and therefore the responsibility to help the infant fully develop. In attributing this to her, Winnicot makes the mother vulnerable to experts who prescribe the proper way to perform the role (Doane and Hodges 20). There are now "right" and "wrong" ways to mother.

In the interplay between Klein and Winnicot's theorized mothers, we see a progression towards *idealizing* the maternal, and with this idealization comes even more conflict. Klein's mother is conflicted in that she eventually embodies both good and bad. Winnicot gives his mother agency, then sets up standards she must follow, claiming that mothering is "natural and intuitive"(qtd in Doane and Hodges 24). This naturalization of motherhood is problematic for several reasons. First, for women (or men!) for whom mothering is not "natural," Winnicot's claim makes *them* aberrant and unnatural. Part and parcel to this is Winnicot's ideal(idol)ization of the mother. Within Winnicot's mother is the vision of a perfect nurturer, a source of comfort, and someone necessary to development, but part of this picture is

the inevitability of falling short of these standards. The perfect mother Winnicot sets up is impossible to achieve. Later theorists further situate the mother in society, thus continuing to develop the conflict between the ideal and the real.

As Judith Arcana writes, "despite flowery seasonal tributes and nostalgia, mothers have a bad reputation; they are blamed for nearly all social ills by everyone . . . . While mothers are lauded in greeting card verses and sentimental songs, . . . the popularization of Freudian-based psychology encourages each of us to condemn our mothers for thwarting us, repressing us . . ." (2). There is this desire to see mothers as "angels, beautiful and soothing presences who have no human needs or flaws" (Arcana 6). Popular culture (i.e. Mother's Day) contributes to the idealization of mothers--as well as to their demonization. After all, if Mother's Day tells us mothers deserve such praise, mightn't it imply to some that mothers deserve blame when they do not perform their role to greeting card standards? Mothers are taken out of the real world, and this has ramifications. It flattens out the complexity of the role of mother, and in doing so it masks the conflict mothers feel internally as well as the conflict that is inherent in what society places upon them.

Most theories of on motherhood tell an oxymoronic tale of women who

at the same time are saints and sinners, who constantly fluctuate between meriting praise and blame. These are women who struggle to meet their own expectations and the expectations placed on them by society and their children. Mothers internalize these fluctuations and contradictions. Adrienne Rich's landmark text, Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution, discusses the pull between these conflicting pictures; she describes the contradictions inherit in the construction of the mother by setting up motherhood as experience, that is her own, against the institutionalized picture of the mother--the real contrasting with the ideal. Rich writes of her children causing her "the most exquisite suffering. . . . It is the suffering of ambivalence: the murderous alternation between bitter resentment and raw-edged nerves, and blissful gratification and tenderness" (21). This text presents the complexity of motherhood. It shows the conflict that results from the interplay between internal and external goals and expectations. It also shows the conflict that is part of the relationship between mother and child.

Clearly the mother has power over the child, at the very least because she is the adult in charge of its care but also because the child may feel emotional ties. In spite of this maternal power, the child also has power in terms of the demands it places on the mother and the demands society places

on her because of the existence of the child. The child changes the mother's identity. Again according to Winnicot, "a mother is not only completely devoted to but also fused with her infant" (qtd. in Doane and Hodges 24). Rich also acknowledges this identification with the child, but in a very different way: "But, in another sense, beyond that physical margin, I knew I was fighting for my life through, against, and with the lives of my children. . . . I had been trying to give birth to myself" (29). Rich's version of this maternal identification with her children is one that recognizes such a connection, but also recognizes a conflict, a pushing and pulling inherent in the relationship.

Taken together, Klein's, Winnicot's, Arcana's and Rich's mothers tell us a variety of things. In mother-child pairings, the child can respond in a several ways, sometimes problematically (either by being properly "retrained" à la Winnicot or with the "depression and anxiety" of Klein). Also, whether constructed by child, mother, or society, there is a connection between mother and child. And, again regardless of who constructs them, there are obligations in the mother-child relationship. To be maternal is to care for and "prepare" the child. But to be "maternal" is also to sometimes resent and not live up to those obligations, and to feel guilt over such resentment and "failure." Clearly, there is a great deal of conflict surrounding the ideal and the real. Writing

tutors occupy a similarly complicated position. Their reality is different from the idealized situations they imagine and train for. They, too, must deal with demands and expectations placed upon them.

Some of the most difficult demands writing tutors to respond to are those they place upon themselves. Talk to any group of tutors, and at least part of that group will feel that they don't do enough for their students. Time or energy or patience run out. Students leave the writing conference without knowing *everything* they need. It's the nature of the situation, but knowing that doesn't always ease the conflict tutors feel about sending students away with something the tutors feel is "incomplete." Steve Sherwood, in describing part of this tutoring phenomenon, adopts a term applied to psychotherapists. According to him, tutors can act with a "neurotic unselfishness" (64). They may take on an idealized role, spending excessive time with students, sometimes even doing student work, all the while with the intention (and firm belief) that they are doing good, helping their students. The irony here is that "neurotic unselfishness" implies disease. Tutors (and therapists) who act this way are "going overboard." When they give all to their clients, they are doing something wrong. Women who act this way are being "good," "natural" mothers. Mothers who are "neurotically unselfish" are doing what Winnicot

and others said they should; they are subsuming themselves in their role. They abandon other parts of their identity and focus on ("fuse with" their child). Tutors try to be "perfect" by doing all they can to ensure a "perfect" student paper. The students with "ideal" tutors leave a conference with "perfect" papers, but part of being a "perfect" tutor is also enacting the egalitarian philosophy of writing center instruction.

According to writing center doctrine, writing center teaching levels the field (or *should* level the field) between instructor and student. Michael Pemberton writes, "writing center tutoring is--at least in theory--supposed to replace the hierarchical model of instruction . . . with a collaborative model in which the tutors and students become co-learners" (14). This lack of hierarchy, however, is also fictionalized, another false ideal, because, though students may be considered experts on the content or context of their writing, they are always subordinate in that they come to the writing conference in search of guidance; tutors are not the ones who need help. Students can never *really* have power. The power dynamic between mother and child is equally complex.

It is difficult to talk about power relations without over-simplifying them. As the adult, the caretaker, mothers have power in the relationship.

However, because of the demands placed upon them, by society and the child, mothers can also be viewed as lacking power in some way. I want to acknowledge this, but at the same time, despite these fluctuations, I want to argue that the age of mothers, their positions as adults, provides them with more power than the child. In writing centers, students do have power oftentimes in terms of the content and context of their writing, and they also have power in that they choose how to respond to the tutor. In spite of this, tutors are still the authority in the session, and it is still their job to manage it. Tutors must negotiate between the reality of their job, the authority and responsibility it entails, while still maintaining the mask of equality. This is something else that engenders conflict. One component of a tutor's responsibility is the kind of questions they ask, the kind of dialogue they have. Directivity is an important issue in this.

Though some schools of thought (Meyer and Smith 1987) strongly support nondirectivity in the tutoring session, this is still an open debate. The question is, how focused (or how open-ended) should be the questions tutors ask of students? Should they be very pointed (directive), easing students toward "good" topics, or should they be open-ended (nondirective, less directive) to help students find their own interests and their own way of

approaching things? Because of the expert status conferred on tutors in what is supposed to be an "equal" situation, the issue of directiveness is an inescapable part of the writing conference. And in making decisions about directivity, either permit (or do not permit) the student certain freedoms and flexibility. Tutors make these decisions after assessing the student and the writing, and, according to Muriel Harris, choosing between the directive and the nondirective also is based, in part, on the goals of the session (69). But what are the goals of a conference, and who gets to choose them?

Though writing centers most often respond directly to a specific piece of writing, there is the larger goal to try to teach beyond one paper, to teach writing strategies. Tutors work with students on a given essay while also trying to provide them with tools for future writing situations. There can be conflict between the present and the future, between the particular and the generalizable. Students are more often interested in the particular and these differences are part of the collisions Pemberton describes when he writes: "when tutors meet with students to discuss texts, the writing conference becomes a nexus where personalities, personal agendas, emotions, expectations, histories, and circumstances collide" (13). In dealing with these, tutors wear different hats; they take on many different roles, certainly from

one conference to another, but oftentimes even within a single conference. Here, Pemberton notes the intimacy that is part of teaching one-on-one, and he notes that "collisions" are inevitable as part of this intimacy. The question one is left with is--how do tutors deal with this intimacy? I believe that they should deal with it through a rubric of the maternal. But what does the maternal metaphor do for us that is different from other possible tutoring metaphors such as the therapist or coach?

The therapist metaphor recognizes the service position of the tutor, and it recognizes the presence of emotions in the writing conference; however, it has certain clinical overtones that many writing center professionals find antithetical to the situation (Hughes 1998). Also, though tutors need to maintain some distance from their students, they rarely think in terms of the stark disconnection of therapy. The coach suggests ideas of guidance and preparation, and even good feeling, but the maternal does more than merely *suggest* these. These are important components of the maternal, but, perhaps most importantly, the maternal, because of its vexed nature, helps tutors make sense of all the demands placed upon them and the conflicts that are a part of these.

Though they exist in different arenas, both tutors and mothers act out

their layered roles day-to-day while coexisting with an impossible-to-achieve ideal. They shift from directivity to nondirectivity, from disciplinarian to nurturer, focusing on the particular moment, but always with one eye looking forward to future situations for which the student (or child) will need to be prepared. Mothers are supposed to prepare independent people. Tutors are supposed to prepare independent writers.

The maternal metaphor also recognizes the conflict that is part and parcel to the role of writing tutor. It recognizes the investment many tutors feel in their students. It recognizes the tension between the ideal and the real, a tension that is present in ourselves, our students and the conference situation itself. In addition to these, the maternal brings with it a stronger idea of nurturance. Like other metaphors, this one is not without its flaws. All metaphor is somewhat reductive. Despite these, I've found this useful in planning for my conferences and making sense of all that goes on in them.

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